

Bison & Other Animals

Bison and moose eat different food and coexist in all northern bison ranges, sometimes at high densities, along with thousands of ducks and other nesting birds. Studies have



Moose are browsers (eat leaves, twigs, buds) while bison are grazers (eat grasses and sedges)

Native Elders Describe Reliance On Wood Bison



Rev. David Salmon

Native elders in Alaska, Yukon and NWT have shared oral history about the occurrence of wood bison, how they were hunted, and their importance as a resource.

Athabascan people hunted bison with the aid of snowshoes, dogs, spears and bows and arrows. Bison meat was dried for winter use and hides were used for clothing and shelter. Bison remains occur at several archaeological sites in Interior Alaska and Canada.

Did You Know?

Bison colonized North America several hundred thousand years ago.

Wood bison, not plains bison, once ranged across much of Alaska. Plains bison occurred further south.

Both wood bison and plains bison were nearly extinct by 1900.

There are 4 herds of plains bison in Alaska, totalling approximately 900 animals.

There are 6 herds of healthy, free-ranging wood bison in Canada totalling approximately 3000 animals.

Muskoxen appear to have disappeared at roughly the same time as wood bison. Muskoxen were successfully restored to several areas of Alaska.



Who is Involved in North American Recovery?

- Canada's Wood Bison Recovery Team
- International Union for the Conservation of Nature
- 5 Canadian Provinces and Territories and 2 National Parks
- Canadian Wildlife Service
- Alaska Department of Fish and Game
- Many communities in Canada and AK
- Native governments
- Conservation groups
- University of Alaska Fairbanks
- Canadian Universities

How You Can Be Involved

ADF&G encourages public participation in the planning process. Your input is valuable. Keep informed and updated on wood bison restoration efforts in Alaska by signing up for our newsletter and checking our website periodically.

To sign up for the newsletter, comment about the wood bison restoration project, or for more information, contact: Margo Matthews

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Wood Bison Restoration in Alaska

An Opportunity to Bring Back a Native Species



Alaska Department of Fish and Game



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What is a Wood Bison?

Wood Bison (*Bison bison athabasca*) are the largest land mammal in North America. Bison have a long history in Alaska, from the long-horned prehistoric giants to the smaller-horned wood bison, which were the last to roam the state before disappearing during the last few hundred years.

Wood bison and plains bison (*Bison bison bison*) are different subspecies. Plains bison once ranged throughout the western and northern plains, while wood bison lived in northern meadows and forests. Wood bison are well adapted to life in Alaska and northern Canada.

Wood Bison



Photo: C. Gates

- Bulls average 1800 lb.
- Little or no chap hair on foreleg
- Taller, square hump
- Taller and larger
- Darker color
- Cape usually does not form distinct boundary behind shoulder
- Long, straight hair sloping down on forehead
- Smaller, more pointed beard

What Happened to Them?

Skeletal remains show that wood bison lived in Alaska for several thousand years. They disappeared from Alaska probably because of a combination of factors, including changes in the distribution of habitat and the effects of hunting. Wood bison disappeared at about the same time as muskoxen.

The most recent skeletal remains of wood bison in Alaska are estimated to be about 170 years old, based on radio-carbon dating. The last reported sightings of wood bison in Alaska were in the early 1900s.

- Bulls average 1600 lb.
- Shorter neck
- More rounded hump
- Smaller and stockier
- Chaps of long hair on forelegs
- Cape usually lighter in color
- Frizzy hair on head
- Large, more rounded beard
- In summer, cape forms distinct boundary



Plains Bison

Photo: C. Gates

Why Bring Them Back?

By 1900 there were fewer than 300 wood bison left in the world. Conservation efforts in Canada have increased numbers to over 3000 healthy, free-ranging animals. Returning this historically important animal to Alaska would be a



major step in securing the long-term future of wood bison. It would

also enhance Alaska's wildlife resources, restore a key grazing animal to our northern ecosystem, and increase habitat diversity in those areas.

Over the long term, wood bison could provide a renewable resource for Alaskans by supporting a variety of uses such as viewing, hunting and related businesses, as they do in Canada.



Biologists assess potential wood bison habitat

Why Alaska?



Alaska's vast expanses of meadows and other wood bison habitat make it one of the "last frontiers" in North America for restoring additional herds of wood bison.

ADF&G biologists are assessing habitat to identify specific areas of Interior and Southcentral Alaska that could support wood bison. Investigations so far show that the Yukon Flats is one area with high quality habitat. In addition, preliminary studies indicate that other areas are probably suitable as well.

Keeping wood bison and plains bison separate is important for maintaining the genetic integrity of the subspecies. Wood bison would not be reestablished near existing herds of plains bison.